

FEAST AND FAMINE: A GOURMET'S GUIDE TO RAPA NUI

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"Food serves as a most important manifestation of social relationship, and through it kin ties, political loyalty, indemnity for wrong, and the canons of hospitality are expressed."
Raymond Firth, 1939:38.

A few years back I received a letter asking if I could recommend a cookbook that described and discussed the cuisine of Rapa Nui. Before there is a rush to Amazon.com, let me assure readers that, to date, no Rapanui cookbook exists. If there were one, it would be very slim indeed. Not that there is anything wrong with the traditional food of Easter Island, it is just that, in the past, choices were very limited. When an old Rapanui was asked to describe what life was like in the 'old days', she replied, "Here we begin at birth by eating sweet potatoes, then we go on eating sweet potatoes, and finally we die" (Métraux 1971:153).

The ancient Rapanui society was shaped by food, or the lack of it. Legends describe episodes of hunger, but also feasts. And, life on the island today still reflects the once-feared shortages and today's feasts still retain elements from earlier times. Today, of course, there are many additions to the local diet, most of them being introductions from Chile as well as from other parts of Polynesia; grocery stores in Hanga Roa now carry a variety of exotic items that were unheard of just a few years ago.

But Rapanui legends tell of feasts, with lip-smacking detail, and describe the traditional foods such as sweet potatoes, yams, taros, bananas, chicken, eel, lobster, fish, and sugar cane. Seasonings were unknown and still are not used today in a traditional *umu* (earth oven).



Opening the *umu*. Delicious steaming meats and vegetables wrapped in banana leaves are extracted from the *umu* pit.

The importance of sweet potatoes can be indicated by the different names the islanders have for this basic food: seventeen have been recorded and all of the names relate to color and shape of the tubers, not to the leaves (Métraux 1971:154).

Fish has always been a staple food. A local and tasty

fish, *nānue*, is caught with hook and line from the rocky coastline; the number of names for this fish reveals its value: if small, it is *nānue pua*; larger is *nānue pua iti iti*; up to 15 cm, it is called *nānue pua vaenga*, still larger is *nānue pua toki toki*, and up to 40 cm, it is *nānue kekeho*. It has various color "phases", and these are also given specific names (Lee 2004:33).

The waters that surround Rapa Nui used to be teeming with lobsters, called *rarape* (langosta), as well as other fishes. Tuna (*kahi*), caught offshore by fishermen, is a delicacy. Fishermen today also take shark and other kinds of sea life and, judging from archaeological excavations, they caught dolphin in past times.

In ancient times, only the king and a few noblemen and priests were allowed to eat tuna. During the *tapu* period, expert fishermen caught tuna in the king's boat, which was called *vaka-vaero* and was decorated with cock's feathers (Métraux 1971:132).

And then there is the ultimate meat resource: cannibalism. This practice is often mentioned in the legends, although we have little hard evidence for it. Stories tell of cannibal feasts, describing the fingers and toes as the tastiest morsels. Routledge (1919:225) records the following story: "The great-grandmother of an old man of the Miru clan was, according to his account, killed on the high central part of the island by the Ureohei and eaten. In revenge for the outrage, one of her sons, Hotu by name, killed sixty of the Ureohei. Another son, who had pacifist leanings, thought the feud ought then to be ended, but Hotu desired yet more victims, and there was a violent quarrel between the two brothers, in which the peace-maker was struck on the head with a club; for, as Hotu remarked, if they had slain his father, it would have been different, but really to eat his mother was 'no good.'"



Fishermen sell locally caught fish at the open market. While all kinds of fish are caught, the favorites are tuna and *nānue*.

The legend of Tupeti, the Successful Farmer, tells how a beautiful girl marries an ugly man because he has a lot of yams, sugar cane, bananas, and chickens (Métreaux 1971:389), giving new meaning to a “butter and egg man”. Other legends describe events that occurred because food was denied: one tells of how the men and women living in a house had eaten all the fish, lobsters, and congers without leaving anything for the *ivi-atua* (priest). In the night the priest pushed the support post of the house, causing the statues at *ahu* Tongariki to fall down (ibid.:87); and still another tale tells how the statue carvers ate all of a huge crayfish, leaving none for an old woman who was a magician. In anger, she gave an order and all the statues fell down (ibid.:88).

The gory legends recorded by Métreaux tell of ferocious battles, killings, revenge and more revenge. Often the legends refer to cannibal feasts (Métreaux 1971: 371 ff.). Was there, indeed, cannibalism? Was it the typical symbolic eating of a portion of one's enemy such as is found in other parts of Polynesia? Or was it truly protein hunger? Flenley and Bahn (2003:156-7) discuss cannibalism: “...the evidence for the practice on the island is entirely narrative, and not archaeological.”

EARLY TIMES

Food plants came to the island with the first arrivals: taro, sweet potatoes, yams, bananas, sugar cane, and *tī*¹. They also brought *mahute* (for barkcloth), chickens, and rats. Pigs and dogs, common in other parts of Polynesia, never made it to Rapa Nui, if indeed they began the voyage. And then there were some typical Polynesian plants that are “missing” from the island. Because Easter Island's climate is cooler than most other islands in Polynesia, breadfruit, coconut palms, and kava did not grow; if these plants were brought, they did not survive.

When the Polynesians first arrived to Rapa Nui, tradition states that they had nothing to eat but fish, turtle, ferns and fruit (including sandalwood nuts – a tree now extinct on the island). They planted their crops and, while they waited for them to grow, they relied on the island's natural resources.



Taro plants grow in rocky depressions and are found all over the island, as well as in planted gardens.



Bananas thrive in the island's collapsed lava tubes or in man-made *manavai* which protect them from the winds, and also help to retain moisture.

This led to the extermination of many species of birds, including all land birds. Excavations at 'Anakena uncovered bird bones in archaeological sites and revealed that Easter Island was once the richest seabird island in the world, with 25 species, 14 of which are now extinct. The newly-arrived Rapanui found that many of the land birds had lost the ability to fly and, never having been exposed to predatory humans, they were easily caught and soon eaten into extinction. Add to this a loss of habitat and introduced rats (which ate bird's eggs), and soon the birds were gone (Flenley and Bahn 2003:88-89).

The new arrivals to Rapa Nui were greeted by a forest of huge palm trees, similar to the Chilean Wine Palm. This giant palm not only provided nuts, but also a sap that produces sugar and other nutritious substances. Estimates are that the original palm forest could have provided 2 liters of palm sap per person per day, and this would have been available for some 7 to 8 centuries (Bork and Mieth 2003:121). The sap also could have been fermented into an alcoholic beverage (von Saher 2004:70), although we have no evidence that the Rapanui did so.

The land was cleared for crops, and the huge palm forests were cut down. The trunks of these trees likely were used as rollers to move the great statues, further decimating the groves of trees. By AD 1500, the population had spread over the island, the land was cleared (causing erosion and loss of productivity), and food resources were scarce. This is the Rapa Nui that we know the most about.

Routledge (1919:218) notes that, “Animal diet formed a very small part of [food], rats being the only form of mammal; but chickens played an important role in native life....” Chickens were indeed important, not only as protein, but also as symbols. In the old days, the king (*ariki-paka*)² made strings of white feathers tied to sticks that were placed amongst the yams to make the plants grow; small fish were also buried amongst the sugar cane to help bring up the plants. Feathers were used for ceremonial hats. Chiefs did not eat rats because their power for causing chickens to increase would then be diminished (giving the chief a ratty nature, disastrous to eggs) (Routledge 1919:242). Métreaux (1971:330) adds that rites of fertility required priests to bury or spread pieces of coral or

eaweed on the plantations. These "charms" were supposed to have a favorable influence on the crops.

Métraux (1971:343) mentions that Rapanui relied on feasts to break the monotony of life. As soon as one feast was over, another one began elsewhere on the island. "At every feast there was a great display of food, especially of chickens. Food was piled on stages or conical towers. It was said that feasts were often disturbed by quarrels among warriors... who fought for shares. Feasts were celebrated at the birth of a child when the father's family presented food to the mother's family; feasts celebrated lives of the newly deceased. In ancient times, banquets were offered to one who had promised aid, both to show gratitude and to bind the guest by the magic of the "gift meal". When invited to eat chicken meat, the priests received the rump of the bird (*huahua*) (ibid.:331).

When an increase in poultry was needed for a feast, the *ariki-paka* was asked to make a charm to cause such proliferation to happen.

In ancient times, feasting not only commemorated a departed relative, but also might honor one still living. Called "*paina*"³ these feasts were a testimonial of esteem to a father or brother. The usual place for this ceremony, which involved a figure made from woven reeds, was before an *ahu*. Great feasts are described, often involving rats as food, and accompanied by much dancing and singing. Another feast, called "*koro*" was like a house party on an extended scale. A special dwelling was made and accounts describe "ten cooking-places" and "hundreds of guests" (Routledge 1919:284). Feasts were held in certain months only, and the times depended upon the stars: the season for the *paina* depended upon the position of the constellation of Orion (ibid.:235).

The island's infamous Birdman Cult appears to have developed from an attempt to protect the seabirds from human predation (Métraux 1971:313). A legend describes how the gods Makemake and Haua drove the birds to Motu Nui to protect them. Usually in a traditional Polynesian society, all that was required to conserve a resource was for the chief to declare a *rahui*, a prohibition, on the area (Handy 1927:45). Did hunger cause islanders to ignore the *rahui*? The birdman cult may reflect food shortages and attempts to prevent over-harvesting of the sea birds. Birds were the only conspicuous creatures and just about the most interesting living thing on the island, next to man himself; and also they contributed thousands of eggs for food (Métraux 1971:331).



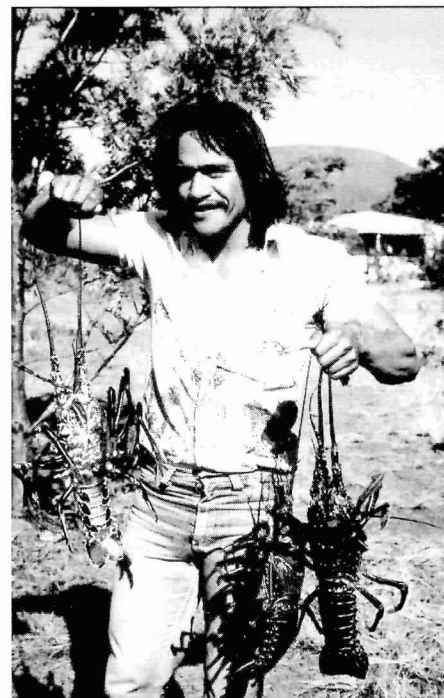
A few birds have been coming back to Motu Nui in recent years, such as these masked boobies. But the huge flocks seen in ancient times are likely to ever build up again (Photo: Elaine and Don Dvorak)

The great object of the Birdman Cult was to be the first one to obtain a newly laid egg of the sooty tern from the island of Motu Nui. After the ceremonies were completed and the nestlings hatched, men from the winning clan carried them to the mainland in baskets. After that, it was permissible to eat the eggs. Some young birds were kept in confinement until grown, a bit of red *tapa* tied to the wing and leg and they were told to fly to the "world outside" (Routledge 1919:258-265). Seabird eggs were consumed in great quantities. Métraux (1971:163) noted that islanders who went with him to Motu Nui ate more than 100 eggs within half an hour. It is no wonder that the birds deserted the island in favor of more secure places to nest.

Before I began my years of field research on Easter Island in 1981, I gave little thought to island food. But while living with island families during some six years of research, I experienced first-hand what food meant to the locals, and how shortages affect lives. One winter the semi-annual supply ship was late and the few local stores had empty shelves. One store had a couple of boxes of matches and some expensive whisky, but no flour, sugar, or bread. And then the island ran out of propane for cooking and heating water. Cooks reverted to outside fires and we ate fish and took cold showers. Finally the supply ship arrived, but a heavy storm prevented the off-loading of the cargo. For days we all stood on the island, looking out at the supply ship, so near and yet so far. Finally the seas calmed, and the cargo came ashore.

I never went hungry, although meals were often drearily monotonous. We ate fish, fish, and more fish. So it was not a predicament of hunger but of boredom. In winter, when the local vegetable gardens were empty, the craving for a real salad was overwhelming. I dreamt of lettuce! Before 1984, *rarape* (langosta) were plentiful, and they were a delicious treat. But in their eagerness to cash in on the demand, island divers over-harvested them and now they are rare⁴.

The usual breakfast included black coffee (powdered and usually laced with too much sugar); unleavened bread that tasted like cardboard and looked like a hockey puck; and powdered milk, powdered orange drink, etc. Lunch in the field consisted of the "hockey pucks" with a slice of cheese,



Rapanui divers used to catch huge langosta such as these. Today they are rare.

and dinner was fish or chicken with sweet potatoes and, if lucky, a vegetable. Primo treats were canned peaches, a product of Chile.

I did observe some interesting behavior around food. Islanders would not eat *rarape* if it had been caught with shark meat as bait (they say it makes the langosta taste bad). They prefer imported chickens because the island's chickens eat cockroaches and it is said that gives the chicken a bad taste. Fishermen discovered that tuna bite better at night so they now they fish at night. Most fishermen who catch sharks only take their liver, and throw out the rest, or use it as bait. I have seen islanders use choice bits of tuna as bait to catch *nanue*; and I was told that some boil shark liver to extract the oil and use it as a salve for wounds, cuts, or burns. It is believed to heal without scarring. In earlier times, islanders would not eat shark, but this seems to be changing (Lee 2004:32).

In the 1970s, a whale was killed in 'Anakena bay. When the word got out, half the village rushed to 'Anakena and the man who killed it sold the meat for sixty pesos a kilo. Even the bones were taken for carving. I was told that old Sebastian Pakarati⁵ harpooned a whale in the bay off Hangaroa in 1943. It took all day to haul it in with the help of many fishing boats, some of which were overturned in the struggle. Finally they brought the whale in, but could only get the front end up on the shore. Sharks devoured the tail end. But they got a lot of meat and made candles out of the blubber, enough for the whole village. Whalebone has been found in archaeological contexts and islanders often see schools of them offshore, particularly off the north coast.

As for the availability of meat in modern times, the island formerly had a huge sheep ranch, and rustling sheep was a major pastime amongst hungry islanders. It was a point of pride to be able to gallop across a field, lasso a sheep, kill and skin it, and be off in a matter of minutes to a cave to cook it in, out of sight of the company guards. The results of these impromptu sheep barbeques can be seen today in caves and cave shelters around the island. One famous episode involved an islander who was arrested for having a sheep in his fishing boat. His explanation was that he had simply rescued it, as it was "trying to swim away from the island." Now it is cattle



As part of the Tapati Festival, families participate in a contest to see who has grown the best produce. Piles of vegetables and fruits are displayed and the winner's points go to the family's choice for the girl who is competing for the title of Queen of Rapa Nui.

that the islanders rustle, even through beef can be purchased in the village.

In the early 1980s I used to accompany my host early on Thursday mornings to the old slaughterhouse at Hanga Piko where we would stand in line to buy meat. Usually they slaughtered two steers per week. Eventually the window opened and numbers were given out. When they opened for sales, they waited on their customers by number. The local joke was that if you got a low number, you bought steak; if you got there late and had a higher number, you got the hoofs and made glue. Now the slaughterhouse is closed and there are butcher shops in the village. Locals state that, while more convenient, the quality of the meat has not improved.

In those days we also went out to the old leper sanatorium for fresh vegetables and bananas. The soil there is rich and deep and their gardens grew excellent food crops. The sanatorium had a long tree-lined drive, a shrine to the Virgin; and a rusted scale for weighing the produce hung from a tree. Today the sanatorium is no longer; a new school is being constructed on that parcel of land.

One concept is very strong on the island: the Rapanui usually look after their own kin. A family is a strong support system in case of hard times, and families share the good times and the benefits. Any surplus food is shared with less fortunate family members. During the times I had a crew on the island, we would notice leftover food heading for the refrigerator when we finished our dinner, and we were thinking in terms of lunch/sandwiches for the next day. But there was never any trace of leftovers by morning. We finally realized that relatives of our host family ate anything that was left over; indeed, they were waiting nearby to descend upon the kitchen after we departed for bed. So the concept of leftovers is a foreign idea; whether this was due to lack of refrigeration in the old days, or a memory of hunger, all food cooked that day was consumed.

As my research project continued and I returned to the island each year, I had to deal with a long list of "wants" and requests from friends and my host families. These ranged from tennis shoes to jeans, bed sheets to watches. One year an islander with a craving for peanut butter begged me to bring him some. I did. With delight, and a spoon, he sat down and ate the entire jar in one sitting. He was sick in bed the next day. But this illuminates a Polynesian attitude of long standing: instant gratification. And never leave any leftovers, or you will have to share them.

IF YOU GO TODAY...

Traditional foods, cooked in the traditional way – in an *umu* – are still a feature of island life today. Whether it is a feast to honor a family member, or to celebrate a particular event, this custom still prevails. Today's feasts are presented by certain island families as a way of acquiring status in the community. These may be to mark the feast day of the head of the family, or the death of a family member, and the entire village is invited (not all come; the local Chilean component of the island seldom participates). But the local islanders are there, in force.

For weeks in advance the preparations go on. The entire clan of the host family gathers sweet potatoes, taro, bananas,



Islanders line up for a large *umu* to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. The signs in the background are a protest against the nuclear testing at Muroroa (Photo by A. Padgett)

and banana leaves. The men procure the meat, including fish, beef, pork, and chicken. The day of the feast finds the entire clan bustling about, preparing food. Taro is shredded, wood is brought in for fire, along with rocks for the *umu*⁶. Fish arrives via various relatives. The host's refrigerator bulges with chicken, pork, etc. When the *umu* is opened, food is laid out on improvised tables and guests pass by, filling their plates (which they brought with them). Guests sit on the grass where palm fronds have been laid out for an impromptu eating area. Some fill plastic sacks with food and take portions home. Special guests of honor are offered the tail of a chicken, a great honor. The more people that are fed, the higher the status of the host family. It is an enormous undertaking, very expensive and labor intensive, but the family accrues mana and status in the eyes of the community. This is far more important than the sacrifice involved.



Islanders grow various crops on their "parcelas", providing food for their own immediate family, as well as for their relatives.

Nearly all island families have vegetable gardens (*parcelas*)⁷ where fresh produce is grown, including watermelon, pineapple, mango, bananas, taro, sweet potatoes, corn, and even citrus fruit. Taro is not pounded on Easter Island, and thus this dish is totally unlike the *poi* served in Hawai'i: on Rapa Nui, taro is cooked in an earth oven, fried, or boiled. Taro leaves are also cooked in an *umu*, and are delicious. *Ti* root is seldom eaten today, but in former times was cooked, usually for two to three days (Métraux 1971:162-3).

It has been the custom for local fishermen to supply seafood for their families and for sale on the island, but today this situation is changing. Two companies from mainland Chile have contracted with island fishermen to buy all of their catch,

especially tuna, and ship it to Santiago. They pay around 3,500 pesos for a kilo; in Santiago it's sold for 8,000 pesos per kilo. So some of Easter Island's fish goes to Santiago, to the sushi restaurants, etc., where it is considered a delicacy. What is left for islanders are other, less desirable kinds of fish, not so tasty, and full of bones.

If you go to the island today, you will find nice restaurants, some with an international flavor (an expensive French restaurant, and one that features German cuisine, among others); all the hotels have dining rooms and most of them serve excellent dinners, featuring fish. There are snack bars, cappuccino bars, places to buy an ice cream or a beer, etc. Food is strongly influenced by mainland Chile, as may be imagined. The Chilean *empanadas* are often available, with a local flavor: instead of beef filling, they often are made with fish. Another Chilean dish, *sopaipilla*, is often prepared on the island, as is *ceviche*. The village stores carry imported cheeses and meats, frozen chickens, and eggs imported from the mainland, etc. One can buy decent Chilean wines and even American whiskey.

But hey, one doesn't travel to the Center of the World for the food.

A Recipe for Rapa Nui Poi

The *poi* that is prepared and served on Rapa Nui is not at all like the *poi* one finds in the Hawaiian Islands. The components may vary, depending upon whether one adds modern ingredients or not. The basics are:

Bananas, sweet potatoes, and taro, all pulverized/mixed together, and prepared like a dough; wrap the dough up in banana-leaf packages, and tie the packages together with *kakāka* (*hōke maika*: fibrous tissue that adheres to the trunk of a banana tree; when dried it is called *kakāka*). The tied-up bundles are then put into the *umu*, and baked.

Nowadays an islander might add flour, sugar, oil, and vary the basics using also manioc or papaya, but these additions are always added in their raw state, not pre-cooked.

Bon appetite!

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Ti* was used as a food, but also the charred leaves provided a pigment for tattoo.

² The *ariki-paka* was believed to have a huge influence over nature, particularly staple foods. When King Tuu-maheke was born, a new mollusk appeared in the sea; when King Rokoroko-he-tau was born, white chickens increased. When a king died, some plants vanished from the island. The first fruits of all the products were presented to the king; it was his job to pray for rain and to increase the fertility of the land and the chickens. He had to eat in every house before the owners could occupy it (Métraux 1971:132-3).

³ A large *paina* circle is still visible at the *ahu* at Vaihu, on the south coast.

- ⁴ If too many *langosta* are caught at one time, they are kept in the ocean in a trap until needed; the trap is called a *tura* and is made from an oil drum.
- ⁵ The Pakarati family claims to be descended from whales but, if this is a true family belief, it is odd that they would hunt them.
- ⁶ The *umu* begins with a hole dug in the ground. Put in rocks; then put in a big pile of wood and that is covered with more rocks. Light the fire and allow it to burn until wood is nearly gone and the rocks are very hot. Then the charred wood and some of the rocks are raked out and food is put in. *Poi* is packaged in young banana leaves which are wider and more flexible; fish has to be wrapped in *toroko* (a grassy plant) or it will fall apart. For layering, meat can be laid directly on top of the banana leaves, and *kumā* (sweet potatoe) can be placed around. Hot rocks are added, in layers, to alternate with layers of food. After all the food is put in, a layer of banana leaves is added and then a tarp, or sack of some sort, and then all is covered with a mound of dirt. The food cooks/steams inside the *umu* for hours, depending upon the amount of food that is being cooked. This can be four to eight hours, or even longer. For a big religious feast, the *umu* is left to cook overnight. Also, for a large feast, metal trays can be used; *poi* and meat can be cooked in these trays, often stacked on top of each other. A large sheet of corrugated iron (*rapa rapa*) is sometimes put on top of the trays to keep the heat in, and rocks are stacked on top if it.
- ⁷ The *parcelas* are "worked" by the clan members, who then share in the harvest.

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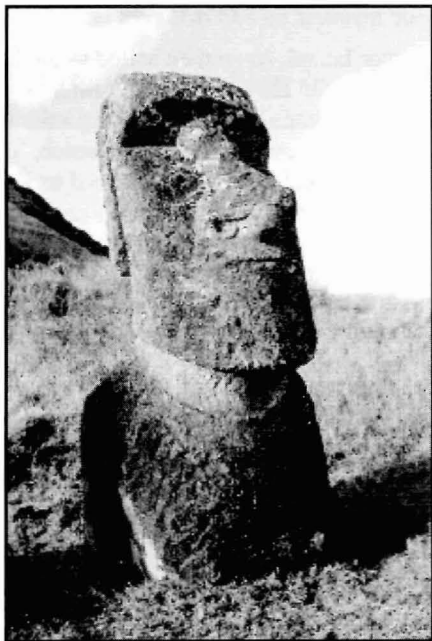
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The Complete Guide to Easter Island

by Shawn McLaughlin



The Complete Guide to Easter Island brings together the latest scientific and tourist information in a format designed to appeal to both researchers and lay readers alike: Sections on history, legends, conservation, island theories, antiquities, and culture complement detailed coverage of the village of Hanga Roa, accommodations, shopping, vehicle rental, entertainment, island sights, and more.

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